

On Clinging to Education

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I. Introduction

According to Plato, a city is only as good as the soul of the man or woman responsible for its wellbeing, who in turn is only as good as the education responsible for the formation of his or her soul. The better part of Books III-VII in *Republic* are devoted to describing and accounting for each step of the philosopher-king's formal education. Described as a "single newly finished person" (425c), the educated philosopher-king stands alone in his full understanding of the Virtues and the Form of the Good, which will be understood in this discussion as human harmony established according to the light of reason, whether between parts of the individual soul or between particular members of a political community. The philosopher-king shares his newly acquired wisdom with his subjects, who follow in his footsteps and attempt their own ascents towards the Virtues and the Good. As both its ultimate product and its driving force, the philosopher-king exemplifies an important cycle of education that Plato strives to present in his *Republic*.

Precisely because the education described in *Republic* is a process in time, depending on so many unpredictable human variables, Plato acknowledges that the philosopher-king's *kallipolis*--his beautiful city--must eventually "face dissolution" in the face of earthly circumstances (546). In spite of the benevolent monarch's rigorous education, the operational complexity of governing so many individuals' aggregated lives will undoubtedly disrupt the city's political harmony. Socrates hypothesizes a series of political degenerations that over time will result in the least desirable city of all, a tyranny. Despite his tremendous political power,

the tyrant is the unhappiest person living in the unhappiest of dominions. He fears and oppresses “anyone who is brave, large-minded, knowledgeable, or rich,” for fear of being supplanted by a wiser and more benevolent monarch (567c). This degeneration and subsequent reemergence of the *kallipolis* will hereafter be referred to as the cycle of the city.

How, then, are we to understand and reconcile our two opposed cycles, that of the city’s constitution with that of the individual’s education? Socrates recommends that, “Those in charge [of the *kallipolis*] must cling to education and see that it isn’t corrupted without their noticing it, guarding it against everything” (424b). This essay will consider the steps involved in the action of both cycles, and offer a reading of *Republic* that celebrates the philosopher-king’s wise attempt to “cling” to education. Plato’s educational cycle is a crucial prerequisite for the cycle of the city, as it prevents the community from becoming stuck in everlasting tyranny. Digging past a simple dismissal of Plato as an out of touch idealist, we find that his educational cycle is not intended to preserve an impossible *kallipolis*. Rather, by asking us to seriously consider his political theory in conjunction with his philosophy of education, Plato articulates a powerful vision of individual citizens working together to realize the ideals of associative life. Put differently, in *Republic*, Plato suggests that politics and education must never be disassociated.

II. The Cycle of Education and its Relation to the Good

As Plato presents his cycle of education, we find the philosopher-king simultaneously embedded in two crucial relationships: one with the Good, and the other with his people. According to Plato, the only person who can fully comprehend the Virtues is he who burns with the rational pursuit of wisdom. He maintains that the human soul is composed of three parts:

the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational (439d). To achieve harmony of the inner constitution, he recommends that this last part “rule” over the other two in an individual’s soul (443b). In Plato’s ideal world, education policy makers aim to identify and develop the natural capacity for rational thought in each individual child who might someday be at the helm of government.

In working towards this end of conferring power on the wisest members of society, Socrates outlines an educational curriculum beginning very early in the child’s life, when his nascent soul is “most malleable and takes on any pattern one wishes to impress upon it” (377b). First, through carefully chosen stories and songs, he seeks to impress on the child an intuitive sense of the goodness of a life lived according to Virtue. Second, with training in mathematics, the child’s capacity for rational calculation is gradually tested and drawn out. Remembering that Plato equates the Form of the Good with humanity’s capacity for abstract thought, we see the child here educated on one hand to imaginatively desire the attainment of a virtuous life, and on the other to effectively realize this desire through his abilities of calculation.

Next comes a stage of physical training, which aims to bring the spirited part of the soul into a fundamental “harmony” with its “wisdom-loving part” (411e). Failure to include this component, Socrates claims, would run the risk of leaving our young pupil guilty of “softness and over-cultivation” (410d). At the helm of the *kallipolis*, Plato wants “men who, upon examination, seem most of all to believe throughout their lives that they must eagerly pursue what is advantageous to the city and be wholly unwilling to do the opposite” (412e).

Unacquainted with physical pain, the inactive philosopher-king would rule without empathy for

the harsh realities of the average citizen's daily life. For Plato, it is absolutely necessary that the philosopher-king's full spiritual well-being be inextricable from that of the subjects who make up his city.

Plato recognizes just how much is out of his control in this endeavor. Although its practical details are admittedly a falsehood, Socrates' assignment of citizens into intellectual classes of bronze, silver, and gold does represent a foundational philosophical tenet of the discussions presented in *Republic*: Individual men and women are not created equal when it comes to loving wisdom and the penchant for rational thought. An individual's educational success ultimately comes down to his/her natural limits for sustained rational thought while a young student. Therefore, not every citizen of the *kallipolis* will be equally inclined to follow the path towards the Good Life as laid out in Plato's educational system.

At each subsequent stage of the educational process the students who have proven themselves unable to continue due to the natural limits of their rationality will be eliminated. We can imagine the class of pupils as a pyramid, paring itself at the edges the farther it ascends toward theoretical truth. The climatic vision and understanding of Virtue is the philosopher-king's alone to experience at the top of the pyramid.

Nevertheless, his education does not stop at this summit; Socrates deplores the idea that his philosopher-king, having reached the highest of epistemological heights, be allowed "to stay [up] there and refuse to go down again to the prisoners in the cave and share [his] labors and honors" (519d). This allusion to "the Allegory of the Cave" cannot be overemphasized, as it illustrates the cyclical nature of Plato's conception of education. Having mastered the lessons of the theoretical realm, the philosopher-king continues to learn and grow by engaging directly

with his constituents. In a perfect world, the existence of this cycle would mean two things. First, potential candidates for the position of philosopher-king would consistently be making their way up the ladder of wisdom, so that there would always be a deep reserve of men and women willing and able to ensure virtuous political rule. Second, this love of wisdom would consistently trickle down towards the masses of the *kallipolis*. Even if each citizen's capacity for wisdom is limited by the nature of his appetite, Plato's hope is to ensure that the city collectively values wisdom as humanity's greatest end in life. With the philosopher-king in power, who, thanks to his training, is "better able to share in both types of life" (520c)—working with his hands in the cave and with his mind above it—Plato assures his audience that the cycle of education exists as a sustainable two-way flow between the unseen ideals of the Good and the tangible realities of everyday existence.

III. The Cycle of the City and the Tendency Away from the Good

Socrates himself recognizes that "everything that comes into being must decay" (546a); his beautiful city is no exception. The plain truth is that the *kallipolis* is unsustainable, mainly because the philosopher-king will lack sufficiently reliable "sense perception" (546b) to keep his subjects happy and to maintain the city's exclusively virtuous political constitution. Much like the escaped prisoner who returns to the cave, the philosopher-king will have difficulty adjusting back to the realities of life below when trying to orient the masses towards the virtuous ascent, which he just completed. Not seeing eye-to-eye with his people, the philosopher-king will have a hard time convincing each and every one of them that they should dedicate themselves to the arduous pursuit of Virtue. As Plato details, wisdom will lose its position as society's highest aspiration—first to honor, then to money, and finally to licentiousness and bodily hedonism.

Each of these ethical turnovers will result in a commensurate turnover of the city's political constitution, each revolution displacing the community further away from the Good than the one before.

In chronological order, Socrates tells us that these constitutions will be timocracy, oligarchy, democracy, and finally tyranny. With each of these degenerations, the covetous human appetite acquires a stronger hold on the city's collective existence. The timocracy is a political structure much like that of the *kallipolis'* monarchy, except that a warlord replaces the philosopher-king. Driven mainly by the spirited part of this warlord's soul, the timocratic city prides itself on the violent pursuit of honor and glory through military conquest. The oligarchy comes about as divisions of labor in the city, which were supposedly stable under the monarch's wise ability to assign citizens to individually appropriate socioeconomic roles, break down and result in a huge gap between a small ruling class of wealthy citizens and large swarms of poor ones. In this society, individual actions are driven by the prospect of acquiring wealth. The democracy logically follows the oligarchy's culture of untempered self-interest; rising competition and economic tensions produce a class revolution and give way to a completely laissez-faire ethical culture. No one person or class rules in the politically anarchic democracy. The people "take no notice of laws" (563d) as they pursue any and all material pleasures in whatever quantities they wish, under what Plato finds to be a solipsistically misdirected conception of freedom.

The democracy's gluttonous power vacuum naturally gives way to tyranny. Having moved so far away from the reverence for reason and harmony propagated in the *kallipolis*, Plato asserts that the city will tragically confer power on the person who proves to be the best

rhetorician, namely the tyrant. Although certainly not the wisest or most virtuous, he will nonetheless be chosen for his ability to resonate with the populace's pleasure-seeking appetites. Furthermore, in an ironic twist of fate, what first appears to be a redemption of the *kallipolis'* monarchic power structure actually becomes the final nail in the coffin of that once beautiful city's goodness. Under the tyrant's iron rule, we soon see the emergence of "the most severe and cruel slavery from the utmost freedom [of democracy]" (564a).

Both the tyrant and his people suffer through this state of perpetual slavery. Plato predicts that because his appetite for power is insatiable, the tyrant will quickly turn on his people and restrict civil liberties in an effort to ensure that no one ever becomes capable of challenging his rule. Enslaving others, the tyrant effectively enslaves himself. Incessantly fearing them, the tyrant is always in discord with his people. He lives the rest of his days friendless and alone within the safety of his own walls, despotically ruling over a people he hates, while unable to shake the yoke of his own overgrown and ever-insistent appetite. In short, Plato laments, a city ruled according to the politics of tyranny is as far as it can be from the Good, and therefore represents the final stage in the decay of the *kallipolis*.

IV. Reconciling the Two Cycles

If we are to believe Socrates' observation that "everything that comes into being must decay" (516a), do we really have reason to worry about the permanence of tyranny? Given that it holds the same power structure as a monarchy, can we not suppose that a philosopher-king will eventually take over once the tyrant dies, restore the *kallipolis*, and kick the cycle of the city back into motion? To put it simply: No, at least not without remembering how to "cling" to education.

Unlike his monarchy, Plato's tyranny is supposed to be naturally sustainable, in light of his observation that human beings tend to seek the fulfillment of their appetites when left to their own devices. Let us suppose for a moment that our city has for the past several decades been ruled by a tyrant, now deceased. Jealously guarding his position of power through widespread oppression, we can reasonably assume that he banned public education under his regime. Now that he has died, the newly liberated people may initially rejoice and elect a new leader, one whom they believe will do good for the city. However, if we are to follow Plato's line of argument, both the citizens and the new leader will have the same skewed vision of what the Form of the Good really looks like in practice as a result of the previous generations' predominantly hedonistic culture.

"A vicious person would never know either himself or a virtuous one, whereas a naturally virtuous person, when educated, will in time acquire knowledge of both virtue and vice" (409d), Socrates tells us. Examining the deliberate emphasis placed on the phrase "when educated" in the preceding quote from *Republic*, we can now bring this essay's central argument to the surface.

Given that the human soul does not tend towards reason, but rather towards the fulfillment of its appetite, there is a very real potential for the city to become trapped in a vicious cycle of one tyrant taking power after the next. Because a person may be born with only the capacity for reason and pursuit of Virtue, those with the potential to be good rulers would never have known themselves as such if raised within a tyrannical state. Like the rest of their fellow citizens, these potential philosopher-kings would have no intuitive inclination

towards the Good. Despite their best intentions, not a single one of these uneducated persons could redirect the trajectory of the tyranny.

Here, then, we return to the central idea of what “clinging to education” may actually mean for Plato’s city. Practically speaking, the *kallipolis* is impermanent. Socrates would agree with the observation that some citizens do not end up playing their optimal role in society. For both practical and ethical reasons, no one human being—not even a philosopher-king—could actually pretend to so wisely engineer and maintain the social and economic life of a full-scale city and its undeniably human population. It therefore does not make sense to read Socrates’ call for his philosopher-king to “cling to education” as a guarantee of perpetuating the *kallipolis* because even he admits himself that it could never last.

We should never cling to the image of “a single, newly finished person” (425c). Rather, we should understand that an education can never really be “finished” and cling to the ideals of the educative process instead. Socrates argues quite clearly that rationality and a correct orientation of Virtue require active cultivation. From the very earliest age, a citizen of the *kallipolis* is raised to believe in the fundamental goodness of enlightened thought. Thus, Socrates explains that “we don’t allow [children] to be free until we establish a constitution in them” (590e). The purpose of the educational system, then, is to establish this belief as best as naturally possible in each of the city’s residents. Some will, of course, take to it better than others. Those who are not receptive to the curriculum and its foundational values will be the ones responsible for the downfall of the *kallipolis*, at least in Plato’s view.

The phrase “to cling to education” therefore means that we should hold on to the idea that, in the face of this downfall, there will be individuals who can help orient one another

towards the Good. The phrase further implies a necessary and shared struggle for a better, wiser, more rational society that works for all, despite the recognition that earthly circumstances will always keep this ideal from being brought into complete and permanent fruition. To use Socrates' own terminology, the cycle of education as it relates to the city is essentially a "noble falsehood." Of course, the city will never work as perfectly in reality as it does in Plato's hypothetical scenario. The interaction of the two cycles examined in this paper will probably result in a constitution with a somewhat correct orientation towards the Virtues. As members of a democratic society in which average citizens face an unprecedented range of choices in everyday life, now more than ever, we should cling to the ideals of education and strive to think beyond the purview of our individual desires. The alternative scenario—submission to the despotic rule of our own appetites—is a possibility far too plausible, permanent, and perilous for us to do otherwise.

Work Cited

Plato, and G. M. A. Grube. *Republic*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992. Print.